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ABSTRACT

This document discusses reasons for the current interest in workplace literacy and describes existing training for the workplace. Among the reasons for the interest in workplace literacy are changing demographics, which are altering the composition of the labor force, and changes such as the demise of the factory model in the workplace itself and the increasing skill levels of jobs. The importance of job-related skills training as opposed to the traditional basic skills approach is discussed. Also included are a list of questions about workplace literacy and the names, addresses, and phone numbers of 10 sources of information about workplace literacy. (CML)

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MYTH #2:

SCHOOLS ARE TO BLAME FOR PROBLEMS IN THE WORKPLACE

"We can't find workers who have the reading and math skills for our beginning jobs."

"The schools aren't preparing young people for the global economy."

"Why should we spend money to make up for what educators should be doing."

While these are becoming familiar complaints from the nation's business community, they spring from a concern that hasn't been faced before -- the 'de-industrialization' of America. Current changes in the workplace are neither temporary nor cyclical. The emerging workplace is described as a radical shift, requiring changes in literacy needs and attitudes about work skills. Schools haven't received very cohesive messages about these changes. And for reporters trying to write about workplace literacy, there are many questions and no pat answers.

WHY THE SUDDEN INTEREST IN WORKPLACE LITERACY?

Traditionally, many young people moved from school into the workplace via service economy jobs, staying there for a few years until other employers, mostly in manufacturing, considered them ready for entry-level occupations. Large employers were more interested in work habits and attitudes than in specific skills, a focus that also made it possible for adults with low literacy to function in semi-skilled or even many skilled jobs.

The workplace has changed very fast, for both entering and adult workers. So have the demographics. These two forces are combining to create an alarming scenario for the nation's business/industry sector, evident in the rhetoric of countless reports and studies. While most of the attention has focused on helping those with the lowest rates of literacy, it is evident that almost all occupations need higher skills.

These are some of the facts and/or predictions the business/industry sector is discussing:

Demographics

* Between 1979 and 1984, 11.5 million Americans lost their jobs, according to Congress' Office of Technology Assessment. Further, the Department of Labor says 2 million more are being laid off each year; three-fourths of those unemployed, it adds, cannot be retrained for new jobs because they lack basic skills. Yet, 70 percent of those who will make up the workforce in the year 2000 already are out of school.

* The entry-level pool of workers is decreasing rapidly. Between 1981 and 1995, the number of 18-24-year-olds will have decreased 22 percent. If past patterns continue, the percentage of that age group opting to go to college will increase, leaving a smaller, less educated group for the workplace and the military. (In the 1930s about 85 percent of the high school

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graduates were available for the workforce, but in 1987 only 44 percent of the graduating class composed the job pool.) Because of decreasing birth rates among whites, the job force in coming years will be composed increasingly of minority populations. Whatever growth there may be in the number of workers will come primarily from women and immigrant populations; most of the latter have limited initial productivity because of the lack of English skills.

> "There are many in-school and out-of-school contrasts that have a bearing on job readiness. They include individual cognition in school, versus group cognition out of school; pure thought activities in school, versus tool manipulation out of school; symbol-based learning in school but an emphasis on immediate effects of an action out of school; and generalized learning in school versus contextual, situation-specific learning out of school. There is very little transferred from school to the out-of-school setting."
>
> Sue Berryman, National Center on Education and Employment

Workplace Changes

* Farming, household workers and the most menial of manufacturing jobs (operators, fabricators, etc.) -- occupations within the abilities of those with very low literacy skills -- are the three with the lowest rate of growth in the future. Even some of the menial manufacturing slots now require the ability to use sophisticated automated equipment. New jobs being created average 2.2 million a year, and jobs requiring the most in academic skills are growing faster than all others.

* In addition to the upgrading of formerly unskilled or semi-skilled jobs, those occupations further up the scale in services and information technologies are becoming more complicated. Both manufacturing and service industries are moving in the same direction, says Sue Berryman, director of the National Center on Education and Employment at Teachers College, Columbia University. The emphasis is shifting from mass production to flexible products, and from routinized, solitary work to teamwork, flexibility and an ability to have an overall view of the work effort.

Berryman notes, for example, that the role of a bank clerk/teller has gone from handling five routinized services to being responsible for 35 diverse tasks, including account management, recordkeeping and meeting the public. Another example is in textiles. Instead of long runs on traditional equipment, production has moved to short, customized runs, requiring looms to be cleaned thoroughly and quickly and repairs to be done on computerized equipment. Workers used to apply what they learned from repairing their cars to repairing the machines, Berryman says, but now they must work with equipment on which they cannot visualize the mechanical problems.

* The demise of the 'factory' model of worker participation further challenges traditional skills. The Business Council for Effective Literacy notes that "new decentralized systems of teamwork . . . are giving workers more autonomy and decision-making authority, which in turn calls for higher-order thinking skills: critical thinking, identifying and solving problems, working in collaboration, setting goals, speaking and writing competently."

* At the same time that many old jobs and most new ones are requiring more sophisticated skills, many jobs -- and workers -- are being de-skilled. This is

true particularly in fast-food and retail employment. "They are described politely as 'entry-level' jobs," says AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland, "but in most cases the entrance leads nowhere but to the back door." Studies show there are few opportunities for promotion among those hired for unskilled, minimum-wage work in the service economy. The minimum wage, unchanged since 1981, would not support a family above the federal government's poverty line; the average wage in the service economy of $8 an hour is at least $10,000 less than the annual average family income. Researchers at Northeastern University calculate that the average annual earnings of 20 - 24-year-old black male dropouts have decreased 60 percent since 1974; for Hispanic high school graduates in the same age group the decrease has been 34 percent. These figures support predictions of a two-tiered society, with a large percentage of minority groups in the bottom tier.

NEW TRAINING FOR THE WORKPLACE

Updating worker skills for the changing economy -- the new workplace literacy -- is a hodgepodge of programs and efforts. The Job Training Partnership Act concentrates on those already unemployed or about to lose their jobs, but it is reaching no more than 7 percent of eligible displaced workers, according to the U.S. General Accounting Office. Further, JTPA programs for young adults have been criticized for their "creaming" effect -- enrolling only those with the best prospects of finding immediate employment.

Employers are actively involved in training and retraining programs. But exact figures are not easy to pin down. According to Ernest Lynton, author of *The Missing Connection Between Business and the Universities*, data are unreliable because corporate accounting systems are

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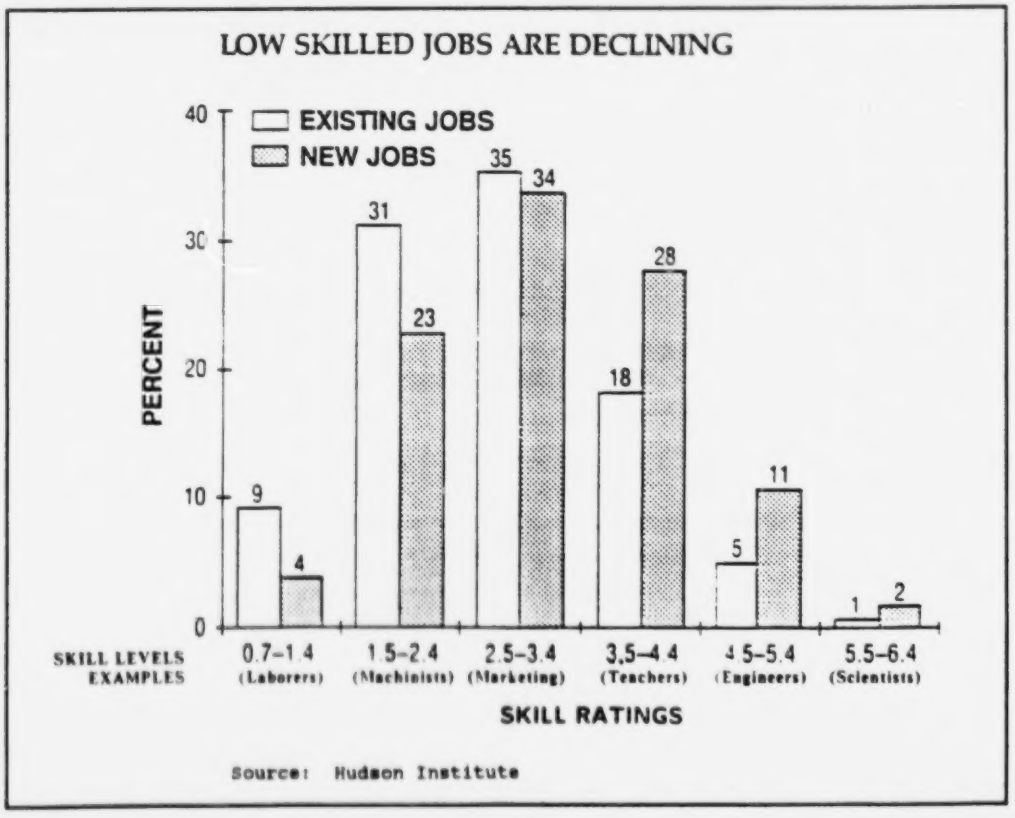

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT WORKPLACE LITERACY

The importance of the changing workplace and the literacy skills needed for it will vary from one community to another. Some questions that reporters might use to get at the complexities:

* Does the public in your area understand the changes in the workplace and new literacy standards? How do workers in transition view their school experiences and the preparation they received?

* What are the entry level jobs of high school graduates and how long do they stay in them? Ask the same about dropouts, males versus females, about minorities versus non-minorities.

* What do local employers say about the basic skills of workers? How much basic skills training do they offer?

* How have the job skills of various occupations in your community changed? How are employees being trained for new skills?

* How do employers specifically define workplace literacy needs? Note: while workplace literacy efforts heavily emphasize verbal literacy, at least in reports about needs, a recent PBS documentary on workplace literacy, *A Job to be Done*, indicated employers were more interested in math skills.

* What classifications of jobs are decreasing? Which ones are increasing and what skills do they need?

* What education/retraining opportunities are available? How are workers in need of re-education attracted to them? Are evaluations of their literacy levels made? What measurements are used?

* Who/what agencies are keeping data on adult literacy, education/retraining enrollments, placements, etc.? Are the data adequate?

* How does school-related training match with local job skills needs?

* What is the projected demographic make-up of school enrollments (and the future workforce) and will they be significantly different in five or ten years?

* What is the dropout rate from job retraining or workplace literacy programs? What happens to those who drop out? What kind of programs seem to be most effective? How is that determined?

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inconsistent in how they figure training costs. The most widely accepted figure, he says, is in the range of $20 billion to $40 billion a year, excluding indirect costs and the value of lost employee time.

Unions are negotiating retraining programs or mounting them on their own, not a new activity for them but certainly one that is occurring much more frequently. For example, the United Auto Workers-Ford Motor Company Employee Development and Training Program, reaching more than 45,000 workers over the past four years, provides basic skills, personal growth and job retraining. The United Steelworkers of America, with almost one-half million members losing their jobs during the past decade, offers comprehensive training at more than 50 centers. The Consortium for Worker Literacy, a group of eight smaller unions in New York City, offers retraining and literacy skills training, the latter available as well to spouses and over-18 children of workers.

Basic vs. Job Related Skills

One of the Consortium features challenges the traditional basic skills approach to workplace literacy. It provides curricula to improve literacy skills based on the occupational skills and requirements of the trainees. This is called 'functional context' literacy training. Its premise is that basic skills are best learned in the context of the skill demands of a particular job. The model comes from the experience of the military in training recruits and increasingly is being used both in the military and in civilian training.

A major developer of the functional context literacy training is Thomas Sticht, a researcher and senior scientist at Applied Behavioral & Cognitive Sciences, Inc., a nonprofit organization focusing on education and training of undereducated youth and adults. He contends that requiring students to 'catch up' on basic skills before receiving vocational training -- as in most training programs -- may backfire. Remediation before giving specific skills training makes the program longer for the student. "A long training period . . . may drive trainees out. Furthermore, it is the abstract academic skills with which many disadvantaged individuals have the greatest difficulty," he says in a new book, *Cast-Off Youth.* "In effect . . . , 'front-loading' job training with basic education acts as a barrier to those who most need job training." Sticht's approach is that those with a 5th- through 9th-grade-level literacy rate are not illiterate. Their skills can be used to increase their literacy rates in conjunction with learning specific job skills. He wrote an electronics course for the U.S. Navy based on this method, and the U.S. Army has built on the concept of functional context training in its own programs, some of which are now being transferred to the civilian sector (General Motors is using the program developed by the Army Research Institute at four sites).

> "This dichotomy between the increased need for highly sophisticated technical education and technology's capacity to dumb down jobs extends well beyond the golden arches of the neighborhood McDonald's. The computer does indeed have the potential of allowing virtually unlimited access to information for a great number of people, of becoming, in short, a democratizing instrument. However, it can also dumb down jobs and significantly reduce the satisfaction workers derive from their occupations. Without broad and effective education, we may well become a nation with two societies: those who have knowledge of and access to high technology and those who do not -- a division between a 'have' and a 'have-not' society with respect to information, interesting jobs, income, and lifestyle."
>
> *Managing the Partnership Between Higher Education and Industry*
> Jana Mathews
> Rolf Norgaard

SOURCES ON WORKPLACE LITERACY

Business Council for Effective Literacy
1221 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020
(212) 512-2415
(Publishes a very informative newsletter, as well as research reports and guides for the business community. Gail Spangenberg is operating head.)

Center for Remediation Design
810 18th Street, N.W.
Suite 705
Washington, DC 20006
(A joint effort of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, National Alliance of Business, National Association of Private Industry Councils, National Job Training Partnership, Inc., and the National Association of Counties to develop local networks among their various groups.)

Human Resources Development Institute
AFL-CIO
815 16th Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 637-5000

Office of Technology Assessment
United States Congress
600 Pennsylvania Avenue, S.E.
Washington, DC 20510
(202) 523-1221

Bureau of Labor Statistics
U.S. Department of Labor
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20212
(202) 523-1221

Workforce 2000
U.S. Department of Labor
200 Constitution Avenue, N.W.
Room S-2511
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(202) 429-5330
(Its Productivity Council has done research on attitudes of adults in retraining programs.)

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Stuart Rosenfeld
Southern Growth Policies Board
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(Has developed case studies of changing workplaces in eight southern communities.)

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